

CHANGE, REPUTATION, AND HAIR:
A TIBETAN FEMALE RITE OF PASSAGE IN MTHA' BA VILLAGE

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ABSTRACT

Cultural change is examined through a case study of a female rite of passage in Mtha' ba Village, Bsang chu County (Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Region, Gansu Province, China). The ritual is described and patterns of social, cultural, economic, and technological change on the Tibetan Plateau are examined. The importance of reputation and competition, as well as the symbolic significance of hair, are explored in Tibetan contexts.

KEYWORDS

Bla brang, competition, female, hair, reputation, rite of passage, social change

INTRODUCTION¹

Few references exist dealing specifically with Tibetan women's hair changing ceremonies. Tibetan publications report only on hair changing in the context of wedding ceremonies. Chab 'gag rdo rje tshe ring (1983), Tshe 'grub (1991), Blo bzang (1987), and Hu'u pen (1984) each report orations given at hair changing rituals. Unfortunately, these materials are offered without data as to who the orators were, when the speeches were given, or by whom and how they were collected. Nam mkha' (2002) reports on hair changing rituals in the past, held for girls who were thirteen years old in Bya khog Village, Kos nan County, Mtsho lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province. Tang (2002) also writes that the ceremony confers adult social status on girls. He notes that hair dressers in the past were only married women carefully selected for their beauty, undamaged teeth, good eyesight, and so on. The girl's hair changing ceremony, Tang notes, announced that she was old enough to care for a family, ready to accept boys coming to propose, and ready to marry. After the hair changing ceremony, village boys made efforts to sleep with the girl and asked her to marry them.

Very little information on Tibetan hair changing rituals is found in English language literature. Tshe dpal rdo rje et al. (2009) provide a detailed chronological description of hair changing rituals in Khri ka County (Mtsho lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province), that includes both a generalized description of the ritual process, and a specific description of a single ritual in 2007. 'Brug mo skyid et al. (2010) discuss hair changing rituals in the context of marriage ceremonies in Stag rig Village (Shar lung Township, Khri ka County, Mtsho lho Tibetan Autonomous Region, Qinghai Province). Though Makley (2007) briefly mentions the hair changing ritual of Bla brang, few details are provided. Sa mtsho skyid and Roche (2011) briefly discuss hair changing, which they call Skra phab 'Hair Taming' in Phug sde Village (Bla brang Township, Bla

¹ The first author thanks the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia for sponsoring his graduate study at Silliman University, Dumaguete, Negros Oriental, the Republic of the Philippines that included a thesis that forms the basis of this paper.

brang County) in their discussion of purity and fortune in village rituals. Finally, Stubel (1958) makes a passing reference to girls in nearby Gtsos (current capital of Kan lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture) having their hair dressed for the first time at the age of seven.

THE HAIR CHANGING RITUAL

Ornaments

Key consultants recalled that, in the past, jewelry worn in the hair changing ritual was small, and was used not to display wealth but more to ensure good luck, good health, or a good life for the girl in her future as an adult and a mother. In the past, jewelry was mostly made of silver and could be borrowed from friends or relatives. Jewelry today is mostly gold and larger than in the past. There is also some degree of competition in jewelry design. The latest, most fashionable designs are preferred, but should retain a modicum of reference to traditional aesthetics.

Parents begin considering preparations for the hair changing ceremony when their daughter reaches the age of fifteen, two years before the ceremony is typically performed. This preparation stage gives parents time to raise funds for an expensive celebration and also ensures that the celebration is socially accepted and appreciated, and hence, successful in improving their reputation. Preparations might begin with purchase of coral or gold necklaces, gold earrings, gold bracelets, and silver milk bucket holders decorated with coral. The family's wealth determines the number and variety of ornaments.

There is no generally prescribed ornament design. Parents are mainly influenced by their experiences of attending the same celebrations where those attending evaluated ornament designs on display. Designs receiving the most appreciation are usually adopted or improved by parents who subsequently celebrate hair changing for their daughters.

A family of ordinary wealth spent at least 5,000 RMB for gold

earrings, 3,000 RMB for gold finger rings, and at least 6,000 RMB for a coral necklace in 2009. These three items are considered mandatory. Once acquired, ornaments are kept in a safe place at home until the day before the celebration.

Such other ornaments as gold necklaces, bracelets, and silver milk bucket holders are optional, and bought if the family's finances permit. The cost of these items is at least an additional 18,000 RMB.

Ornaments sold in local shops are expensive and of comparatively low quality and consequently, many parents travel to such distant market centers as Ka chu (Linxia) Hui Autonomous Prefecture or Sku 'bum (Ta'er) Monastery in Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province to purchase higher quality, though cheaper ornaments. Once acquired, relatives and friends visit the home to help assess the quality and presentability of the ornaments.

The most expensive ornament used in the ritual is *skra* 'ritual hair' – cloth panels decorated with silver discs, amber, and turquoise that are tied to the girl's braided hair.² This ritual hair is considered to be so expensive that only very rich families can afford to own it. In 2009, only one or two village families owned ritual hair. Most families who could not afford *skra* borrowed from those who have them for their daughters' celebration.

Clothes

After preparing the ornaments, parents concentrate on choosing acceptable robes, shirts, hats, shoes, and ritual hair to be used by their daughter during the ritual. During autumn and early winter, new fashionable clothing appears on the market, including Tibetan robes used only during such special occasions as the New Year. The girl participates in choosing clothing. Quality and color are emphasized. However, she should always discuss and seek approval

² Hair ornaments show local variation. The hair ornaments worn in Mtha' ba Village are locally referred to as Li thang ornaments. Ornaments worn in nearby Phug sde Village differ from those worn in Mtha' ba, but are similar to those of the nearby Rgan rgya grassland (Sa mtsho skyid, personal communication).

from parents and friends on the most appropriate attire, which must be considered fashionable. There is a preference for designer clothes as long as they satisfy the required traditional designs and the prescribed colors.

One design for women's traditional robes prevailed in the past because the village had few tailors. The robe was ankle-length. The sleeves widened at the openings and, when standing, fell to the ankles. Robes were made of sheepskin except for a cloth trim at the bottom and the top fold of the robe that created a pouch above the waist. Such robes required about ten sheepskins and lasted about ten years when worn daily. Large robes could be used while sleeping for they covered the entire body. Such robes also had a large pouch and belongings and babies could be carried there. The robes were brown or gray depending on the skin-softening process. Popular colors for robes today are white, red, brown, and blue. Sheepskin robes now tend to be thinner and have less wool.

Hats worn during the ritual were originally lambskin, but locals' increasing wealth saw many people trim hats with fox skin until an influential Buddhist teaching in 2006, after which locals used lambskin.

Traditional boots were made of leather and cloth. At present, however, celebrants prefer high-heeled leather shoes because girls wish to appear taller.

Fashionable Tibetan robes in the past were usually made of silk with several bright colors and cost about 1,000 RMB. Silk shirts cost around 300 RMB, lambskin hats cost 300 RMB, and popular shoes cost 200 RMB. A family therefore spends at least 1,800 RMB on clothing.

Food

Traditionally, butter, *rtsam pa* (barley flour), and yogurt are homemade and considered important foods to be displayed and eaten at gatherings. Bread is also an important food item on such occasions. Both homemade and commercially produced breads sold in the

market are served to guests, including *go dmar* 'red bread,' which includes various forms of deep-fried wheat flour bread. At present, most families buy bread from local Tibetan or Muslim bakeries. Baked bread is round while red bread is square-shaped and about the size of the palm of a hand. Families prefer to order bread from the bakeries because it is very convenient. A family spent at least 500 RMB on bread in 2009.

As at other feasts, meat has a special place in a hair changing ceremony – it is the most important food served. For this purpose, a family butchers one or two yaks, depending on yak size and fatness, or purchases the equivalent. A medium-size yak provided 120 kilogram of meat and cost around 2,500 RMB in 2009.

The meat is chopped into pieces and fried with vegetables or boiled and served in large chunks. Important guests, relatives, and close family friends are served mutton in addition to beef. Offering mutton shows respect and intimacy. A butchered sheep produces about thirty kilograms of mutton and cost around 700 RMB in 2009. Mutton is locally considered tastier and is more expensive than beef.

Boiling meat is the first step. Once cooked, the soup is kept for cooking noodles. Stuffed dumplings are also prepared with the help of relatives and neighbors who visit the family before the celebration. The number of guests is estimated and five dumplings are prepared per guest. One dumpling is counted as equivalent to a small plate of noodles served to an individual.

Cooked dishes of fried meat with cabbage, broccoli, celery, mushrooms, eggplant, potato, green onion, and garlic, and cold dishes are served. Vegetables cost around 500 RMB and are served for lunch or dinner. Tea with bread and *rtsam pa* are served for breakfast. Rice with sugar, cooked *gro ma* 'wild yams', and *mar khu* 'melted butter' are prepared a day before the ceremony and served either before or after meals to guests.

Drinks are generally purchased in local markets. Huanghe (Yellow River) and Qingdao beers are popular, and liquor is also served. These drinks are often purchased several days earlier to be able to get a better price. The family spends at least 1,000 RMB for liquor and 500 RMB for beer. Liquor and beer are displayed on tables with the food. Guests drink liquor and beer as they like. It should be

noted, however, that in the eleventh day of the second lunar month of 2010, the villagers took a collective oath to stop drinking alcohol, and beer and liquor were no longer offered.

Children are given soft drinks and non-alcoholic beverages including Coca-cola, Pepsi, and Sprite, which are bought several days before the celebration, costing the family about 2,500 RMB.

House Preparations

The hair changing ceremony is always held in the girl's home, which is prepared before the celebration by family members and relatives who come prior to the ceremony to help. Rooms are cleaned and prepared for older and important guests. Around ten thick wool mats are prepared for the yard and ten long tables for serving food. These items are usually borrowed from the village shrine in consultation with the shrine manager. Ten thick wool cushions are spread on the yard, where children and young women are seated.

People Involved

In the past, each village family was required to send a representative to hair changing celebrations. At present, however, attendance prescriptions are no longer strictly observed. The family makes no direct, formal invitations to villagers. Phone calls are made only to relatives who live far away. Information about the celebration is shared at the village shrine where older villagers chant, chat, sing, hold community meetings, and retell information to others who are present, and who then pass it on to other villagers. When a family has this celebration, all the other villagers are expected to attend because it is assumed that they already know about the occasion.

The Hair Changing Day

The girl is prepared for the celebration before sunrise on the morning of the scheduled day of the ceremony. Two unmarried female friends or relatives selected by her parents assist the girl throughout the celebration. Ideally, they are fifteen to eighteen years of age and from wealthy families with good reputations. The girl's hair is braided before she puts on her jewelry, clothes, shoes, and so on. This is done by a *skra sla ma* – a female who dresses hair in such rituals. The *skra sla ma* should be a woman who is skilled at braiding, is considered morally upright, has several children, and is from a household with a good reputation. This woman should also be free of mental and physical illness and disabilities, and may not be a widow or divorcee. Only one woman (b. ~1929) qualified to be a *skra sla ma* in the village in 2009. The *skra sla ma* starts by making small braids from the forehead and then makes nine braids at the back of the girl's head. The nine braids are tied together to form a ponytail. The other small braids hang at the sides of the head. In the past, the girl's braided hair was kept until the eighth day after the celebration. At present, the braids are untied after two days. The family traditionally gave the *skra sla ma* a sheep limb as a gift but now give, for example, twenty to thirty RMB or a bolt of silk and satin. Braiding of hair has recently been done by women other than the traditionally designated *skra sla ma*.

After braiding the girl's hair, her assistants help her put on other clothing and ornaments. Makeup is also applied.

The ritual hair is the last item put on the girl and is tied around her head. It is around one and half meters long and roughly twenty centimeters wide. The ceremonial hair hangs at the girl's back down to her hips.

Now fully attired, she enters the room where the family shrine³ is located and kowtows three times, or stands and touches her head to the shrine. Immediately afterwards the girl's parents put a

³ The *mchod khang* is a family shrine inside the house where family members pray to images of the Buddha, Buddhist scriptures, and photographs of reincarnation lamas. Butter lamps and containers of sacred water are also placed in the shrine.

kha btags (a white, ceremonial strip of cloth) around her neck. She now has adult status, as described below.

The girl and her two assistants walk out from the former's house to present her to all her relatives in the village by visiting their respective homes. Her paternal relatives are first visited, after which she goes to her maternal relatives' homes.

During visits, gifts are given and received. For example, the girl brings fruit and candy to the family instead of arriving empty handed and families in turn give her a gift. One of her two assistants is in charge of bringing and giving gifts to the relatives. The other assistant is responsible for accepting and carrying the gift received. Gifts given and received are usually clothes and tea bowls wrapped in pieces of white and yellow cloth.

While in her relatives' home she and her assistants are offered tea and bread. After visiting all her relatives in the village, she and her assistants return to her home where guests, relatives, and friends have gathered and wait to welcome her as a new adult member of the village. All guests celebrate this ritual by eating, drinking, singing, and dancing, which may extend well into the night.

SOCIAL CHANGE IN CONTEMPORARY TIBET

In the early twenty-first century, Tibetan culture and society are in dramatic flux. There are many reasons for this: sweeping economic changes, state education in the Chinese language, the availability of electricity and thus access to images and sounds of the wider world in individual homes, and vastly improved transportation facilities.

China's recent and enormous economic growth began in large part when Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) launched a new development program to modernize China's economy in 1978, that opened China's economy to the rest of the world (Yeh 1993). Chuang (2013:3), for example, notes that "[B]etween 1978 and 2007, the PRC's GDP grew at nearly ten percent a year, which is greater than any other country. China ranks fourth in the world in terms of economic size, next to the USA, Japan, and Germany." This growth has created a situation in

which many new economic opportunities were available to rural Tibetans, such as construction work and other poor-paying, unskilled migrant labor jobs that provided unprecedented access to cash earning.⁴

Most villagers admire the strength of the Chinese economy, while also feeling proud to be Tibetan. They are influenced by TV and movies featuring urban life, and though they admire modern Chinese life, many Tibetans often comment that Han Chinese are obsessed with money, and lack compassion and filial piety.

Economic changes have had drastic impacts on Tibetan areas. According to Wang (2009:5), for example, the Tibet Autonomous Region reported economic growth that at times exceeded the national average. The economic growth rate in 1995, for example, was nearly eleven percent, which was greater than that of China as a whole. Per capita annual income of households increased from 175 RMB (21.36US\$) in 1978 to 1,331 RMB (162.32US\$) in 2000.

One local manifestation of these changes can be seen in locals' participation in the butter trade. Certain Tibetan businessmen from the Bla brang area buy butter from Tibetans in the Bla brang vicinity and transport it to Lha sa to sell in shops staffed by Bla brang Tibetan women. There is a strong demand for butter in Lha sa because it is an essential ingredient in *rtsam pa*, as well as important in providing fuel for lamps, thousands of which are offered daily in Lha sa's many temples; local demand far outstrips production. In A mgon Village (the first author's home village) in A mchog Town, certain adults and their children moved to Lha sa and opened butter shops near monasteries beginning in about 1995. About twenty percent of village households in Mtha' ba Village engaged in the butter business in 2009 with certain family members based in Lha sa.⁵ Butter was collected in Bsang chu and neighboring pastoral areas and

⁴ <http://www.economywatch.com/world-economy-2008.html>, accessed 30 May 2008.

⁵ Certain families had done butter business based in Lha sa since at least 1990 and were the wealthiest village families in 2009.

transported to Lha sa, where it was sold for both food and for butter lamps in monasteries.⁶

In addition to these economic changes, the increased reach of state education greatly impacts Tibetan society. A China-wide policy of compulsory education (six years of primary school plus three years of junior middle school) for children in urban areas began in 1986. Education as emphasized by the local government stresses that every child be sent to school. The *Law on Nine-Year Compulsory Education (jiu nian yi wu jiao yu fa)* established requirements and deadlines for attaining universal education tailored to local conditions and guaranteed school-age children the right to receive at least nine years of education. Nationwide promulgation of the nine-year compulsory education law made enforcement a major responsibility of local government. One way of doing this was through penalties, e.g., a family in Sa dkar Village (near Mtha' ba Village) was forced to pay 2,000 RMB to the local township government for taking a child out of school in 2001. This policy lists the penalty for not complying with the compulsory education law as 1,000-3,000 RMB per child, and was a major factor in most children attending school, a significant break with the tradition of keeping children at home to labor. The vast majority of children now attend school at the primary school level. This is perceived to be a result of the China-wide compulsory education policy.

In 2009, Mtha' ba villagers had accepted the importance of state education. About ninety percent of children finish elementary school and seventy percent of children comply with the nine year compulsory education policy. The village has sixty college graduates, most of whom have jobs as teachers, government bureaucrats, and policemen. Additionally, the traditional dictum that girls should stay at home with their mothers until marriage while boys attended school has changed.

Students are now expected to not only complete middle school,

⁶ In 2009, the purchase price was forty RMB per kilogram in spring, twenty-four RMB per kilogram in summer and autumn, and thirty-six to thirty-eight RMB per kilogram in winter. The selling price was about four RMB per kilogram higher than the purchase price.

but to graduate from university and obtain permanent official jobs. Children who cannot attend college return home to farm, herd, run small businesses, and work in construction. Female dropouts may work as waitresses in winter and do construction work in summer because construction income is much higher than restaurant wages. Despite these alternatives, official government jobs have long been the major reason parents give for sending children to school. If asked, Tibetan parents say the most important reason they send their children to school is for them to find permanent jobs after graduation. Government jobs bring regular monthly salaries that are the basis for a bank loan to buy or build a new home, provide medical care benefits, a retirement income, and the opportunity to make connections with other people in one's workplace that may lead to such advantages as eventual promotion and all the benefits of having social power and influence. Other economic and employment opportunities discussed above are not considered comparable to the benefits of being a lifetime government employee

Furthermore, students who perform poorly, and their families, are less admired than families who have students who do well in school.

Of particular relevance to this study is the school experience exposing a student to young people from many different Tibetan areas, most of whom do not observe hair-changing rituals. Such rituals are often labeled *rjes lus* 'backward'. Young locals believe that such rituals are not done outside the Tibetan world and think that hair-changing has little meaning. Many schoolgirls thus do not wish to have a hair-changing ritual, in fear of being labeled backwards or *srol rgyun* 'traditional'. Though villagers' ancestors observed the ritual, many young girls today feel that it is unrelated to modern youth, focused on educational and economic success, as well as government employment.

Passing the university entrance exam is the focus and goal of twelve years of education (six years of primary school, three years of junior middle school, and three years of senior middle school) because it assures the student a place at a university and ultimately, parents believe, a secure government job. Students begin preparing for this exam in grade one of senior middle school. Most students

turn seventeen years old when they reach grade two or three in senior middle school. Winter and summer holiday classes are held with the goal of helping students score higher on the entrance exam. This singular focus on doing well on this exam is understandable because it creates better employment prospects and also improves the reputation of a family whose child excels in the exam. This focus of time and energy detracts from the importance of anything like hair-changing rituals.

In the past, expending resources on a daughter during the hair-changing ritual might have brought her a more secure future through attracting a wealthier family with an unmarried son. The only hope for a woman to have a successful life was through her husband and his family; the richer the better. Today, however, it is possible to secure a livelihood by passing the university entrance exam, graduating with a university degree, and obtaining a permanent job.

School culture also stresses the acquisition of knowledge and admiration of popular singers and movie stars, who are often Han Chinese. School is a place where new ideas are encountered and a place for children to distance themselves from traditional life and norms, e.g., such school activities as modern dancing and singing performances are deemed much more attractive than such rituals as hair-changing.

Televisions and videodiscs have introduced information to the village that is unprecedented and is profoundly impacting villagers. Williams and Williams (2003:1) noted that, "it is often said that television has altered our world." In the same way, local people often speak of a new world, a new society, and a new phase of history being created and brought about by this technology. TV sets are the source of both national and international news and have introduced new topics into daily discourse between villagers. Conflicts between neighboring villagers, who was marrying whom, and the prices of livestock were main topics before the 1990s. Now, every Mtha' ba household has a television and the content of conversation has expanded to include national and international news.

Young villagers are deeply affected by television shows,

especially such romantic series as *Ta hui ai ni de* 'He Might Love You'. Not only do ideas presented in such shows challenge traditional ideas about love and marriage, but young people are also strongly attracted to new fashions, modern hairstyles, and hair coloring. Even ways of walking and talking are evaluated on a scale of coolness. Furthermore, modern media often stresses success emanating from a spirit of nonconformity and independence, another strong break from local Tibetan traditions that emphasize obedience to family, clan, and elders and identity based on community and religion.

Videos of popular Western and Chinese songs and dances are easily available in DVD format in shops within a few hundred meters of the village in Bla brang Town. A young Tibetan who had never heard of Michael Jackson (1959-2009) was nowhere to be found in 2009. Similarly, the Chinese singer, A du (b. 1973), from Fujian was very popular in the village in 2002, especially his song "Tibetan Girl" (sung in Chinese). Tibetan singer, Kun dga', from the Kham Tibetan region, sings in both Chinese and Tibetan, and was also very popular. The reach and power of modern songs may be most obvious in the English rendition of the song "Take Me to Your Heart" in the version sung by the Danish group, Michael Learns to Rock, which was highly popular in the Bla brang area in 2005-2006. These songs provide models that are considered far more attractive than traditional songs. In the realm of dance, traditional Tibetan dances are now rarely performed, whereas Western break dancing is a common form of entertainment in clubs and bars in Bla brang Town, and is also seen in the Bla brang Tibetan Middle School when students give performances.

In the 1990s, telephones came to Mtha' ba Village and every household had a landline in 2009. In some village households, nearly every family member has their own cell phone. Such large numbers of phones have reduced visiting and the need to send word-of-mouth messages to other families and villages with news of, for example, a wedding, a child's first birthday party, or a hair-hanging celebration.

Likewise, cars and motorcycles that villagers own or have easy access to have given them the ability to quickly travel to destinations that even two decades ago were considered hard to reach and were rarely visited. This has also brought greater awareness of the outside

world.

All of this new technology sparkles with beguiling promises of wealth and modernity, in sharp contrast to what villagers often see as outdated, uninteresting, and 'backward' local traditions. In this context of rapid change and the loss of many vernacular traditions, two aspects of local society that have persisted, however, are concepts of competition and reputation.

REPUTATION AND COMPETITION IN TIBETAN CONTEXTS

Competition is deeply embedded in many cultures, as noted by Mead (1937) in her collection of studies focusing on competition, cooperation, and independence. A classic example of competition is the Potlatch, a feast among Kwakiutl Indians on the North Pacific coast of North America. It was a venue for competition (to display wealth) and also to enhance one's reputation, obtained when the host lavished every guest with gifts in the form of the family's personal belongings, sometimes resulting in the bankruptcy of the family (Gudeman 2001). Though such extremes of conspicuous consumption are unknown in Mtha' ba, hair changing celebrations have a similar role – to display wealth and gain prestige. Competition is integral to Tibetan culture, with families displaying their wealth (and 'modern' status) with TV sets, DVD players, telephones (land lines and cell phones), electric milk separators, refrigerators, trucks, cars, and motorcycles.

Villagers compete to improve their reputation, locally expressed through the term *ming*. Amdo Tibetans typically employ two terms for reputation – *ming* and *snyan grags*. Comprised of the terms 'hear/ listen' and 'resound', *snyan grags* refers to the fame of individuals, and literally means something like 'resounding word/ news'. The *snyan grags* of individuals is said to *khyab pa* 'flourish' or *rgyas pa* 'spread' – it can be thought of as a quality emanating from a person. *Snyan grags* may be described as *che ba* 'large' but not *chung ba* 'small'. *Snyan grags* is always positive, and is applied typically to religious figures who are considered highly virtuous, efficacious, or

both. Such people are outstanding, atypical individuals.

By contrast, everyone has a *ming* 'name'. One's *ming* derives from the *ming* of one's family – it is corporate in nature to the extent that all members of a *khyim tshang* 'family' share the same *ming* regardless of their individual character. *Ming* is furthermore inter-generational, applying not just to a synchronic family, but also to diachronic *khyim rgyud* 'family lineage'. Unlike *snyan grags*, *ming* may be either positive or negative. A positive *ming* is described as *hra gi* 'good' or *drang gi* 'straight', while negative *ming* are 'not good' and 'not straight', though a family or household lineage may, rarely, be called *tsog gi* 'dirty/ bad'. The potentially negative, inter-generational nature of *ming* is demonstrated in the following account:

X's family is considered to have a bad reputation in his village. His father was a thief who often stole from other villagers. Over time, villagers began to distrust the family. Now, X has inherited his father's personality. He is a trickster who often does not participate in communal activities and is thought to lack compassion. For example, if a villager dies, he will not join the funeral. For this reason, if his family encounters difficulties, other villagers do not help them. Because of this bad reputation, X was also unable to find a wife until he was thirty years old. He is now seriously ill, and no villagers assist him.

This account also demonstrates that the basis for a family lineage's *ming* is largely ethical – a good, straight *ming* accrues to households whose members are honest and compassionate.⁷ Importantly, wealth is also taken into consideration – a prosperous household is almost always considered to have a good, straight *ming*.

Hair changing ceremonies are venues for competition between families and a chance for them to demonstrate their *ming*. Attendees evaluate the ceremonies on the basis of:

- ornaments (coral and gold jewelry) and clothing of the new

⁷ The fact that both *ming* and *snyan grags* are largely predicated on Buddhist ethics undermines Samuel's (1993) distinction between 'shamanic' reputation and 'clerical' respectability. The latter is dependent on an absolute scale of judgment derived from Buddhist ethics, and the former is based on a more diverse, flexible, and relative set of criteria.

couple (in the case of a marriage); or of only the girl (in the case of a hair changing ceremony);

- the amount of food, drink, and cigarettes offered to guests;
- the quality/ expense of food, drink, and cigarettes;
- the quality of the entertainment by invited singers, who, if the family spends enough, are locally well known professional singers; and;
- the number of guests and helpers at the ritual.

Increasingly, the major reason for holding hair changing rituals is to display a family's wealth. Such ceremonies are now no longer deemed critical in determining a daughter's future, because education and job opportunities are considered more significant. Consequently, if families cannot afford to compete with richer families, they may not hold a hair changing ceremony. However, given the complex relationship between demonstration and manipulation – holding a sumptuous feast with many guests not only demonstrates but also creates a good reputation – intense competition exists among those who still hold the ritual. In this context, the hair of the girl who comes of age is a critical symbol of the family's reputation, as outlined in the following discussion of the symbolic significance of hair.

HAIR

The anthropological study of hair, beginning with the psychoanalyst, Berg (1951) is of relevance to this study. Berg argued that the hair unconsciously signified the penis, which led him to conclude that cutting hair, as well as head-shaving by monks and so on, were equivalent to castration. In response to this idea, Leach (1958) suggested that the head represents the penis and head hair represents semen. Long hair therefore, signifies unrestrained sexuality and removing the hair suggests sexual restraint, e.g., castration and celibacy. Hallpike (1969) developed Leach's theory by suggesting that long hair is fundamentally antisocial, whereas cut or dressed hair is

social, and related to living under a certain disciplinary regime within society.

Hallpike's argument is particularly compelling in the context of the Tibetan hair changing ceremony, as it suggests that the girl who undergoes this ritual is now living under a social disciplinary regime – the rules that apply to adult women. Now expected to behave as an adult woman she may not, for example, leave when female children call her to play, or wear clothes haphazardly, i.e., she must dress formally in public. She is also expected to represent her mother at home when her mother is away by serving guests with tea, and cooking and serving them food. Hair changing was very important to the girl especially when it came to her role in the family and decision-making. A girl never participated in family discussions without hair changing, regardless of the merit of her ideas or the strength of her convictions. A girl who had not had the hair changing ritual was forbidden by her parents to develop relationships with members of the opposite sex. She was usually kept at home under family surveillance. But, when she was socially proclaimed an adult through hair changing, she was free to develop relationships with males and could have a boyfriend, leading to engagement. She had freedom to choose the boy, but sought her parents' opinion. She was not prevented from having more than one boyfriend. However, the family might have suggested a boyfriend and planned an engagement if the girl agreed.

In the Tibetan context, hair serves as a potent symbol for this regime of social control for several reasons.⁸ We may note, firstly, that managing hair is a way of managing fortune and the lifespan. For example, people do not wash their hair in the afternoon, as this would shorten the lifespan. People also avoid washing their hair before exams, as this also washes away one's knowledge. Washing hair after receiving a blessing on the head from a *bla ma* is also thought to wash away the blessing. Washing hair on the fifth day of the fifth

⁸ The third author, a Tibetan college student, collected the following information presented here from classmates who come from across the Tibetan Plateau. While not all this information applies to this study's focal village, it provides useful background on the significance of hair in a broader Tibetan context.

month is also avoided, as water is considered poisonous on this day. Hair is, however, especially washed on the twenty-sixth day of the twelfth lunar month as this day is associated with King Ge sar's wife 'Brgu mo. Finally, white strands of hair, especially in young people's hair, are considered a sign of good luck, and are, therefore, never plucked, though they may be dyed black.

Within Buddhist contexts, hair also has significance as a store of tantric power and a vehicle for expressing compassion. Strong (2004), for example, discusses how relics of the Buddha, including hair, have come to be venerated. In the discussion of hair, Strong provides a multitude of examples of what hair means in the Buddhist context. The long, uncut braid of *sngags pa/ dpon* 'tantrists' is used to create powerful protective amulets, and smelling a *bla ma's* burning hair is said to prevent illness. Folklore from many locations throughout Amdo also relates how the hair cut from a monk magically grew into a forest, for example, Tsong kha pa's hair is said to have grown into a forest at Bya khyung Monastery. Finally, one of the reasons offered as to why monks shave their head is that it demonstrates compassion – keeping long hair would attract lice that would need to be killed.

These associations of hair with compassion and tantric power relate solely to males, however. For females, associations with hair are primarily concerned with controlling pollution and bad luck. Furthermore, though most of these associations apply also to men, they are expressed as being solely female concerns. Women are thus advised not to comb their hair at night, as this brings ghosts to a household. Women are also not allowed to comb their hair in front of the household shrine. Combing hair towards the sun also brings bad luck to a household. Hair may not be discarded haphazardly, for example, in Khri ka, it is believed that women will be punished after death by having to pick up discarded hairs one by one. Bkra shis bzang po (2012) describes how discarded hair is thought to cause mental and physical illness in a Nyag rong Mi nyag Tibetan Village. Women must also be careful to wear their hair correctly. Short hair is considered ugly in traditional contexts – the longer the hair the better. Such hair must be dressed, however. It is not worn loose even after

washing, immediately after which it must be braided or tied in a ponytail. To do otherwise is considered a sign of moral and sexual looseness. In fact, family members examine a woman's hair after she ties it; stray hairs are considered, in certain regions, sign of bad luck, whereas in other areas, stray hairs indicate that guests will come.

These examples illustrate that hair is a potent, multivalent symbol in Tibetan contexts, related to prosperity, fortune, compassion, and tantric power. Women's hair, and its control, is typically associated with the management of pollution and bad luck, thus giving a female's hair-changing rich ritual significance.

CONCLUSION

In addition to expanding the small corpus of scholarly articles on ritual related to Tibetan women's hair, these materials demonstrate the complexity of contemporary cultural change on the Tibetan Plateau. State education and mass media have resulted in many locals, particularly youths, considering such vernacular practices as hair changing rituals to be 'backwards'. Meanwhile, involvement in the rapid expansion of the market economy has resulted in certain families abandoning increasingly expensive hair changing rituals. More income has provided new opportunities for expressions of traditional idioms of reputation and competition. Celebratory gatherings, such as girls' hair changing rituals, are occasions on which a family's reputation can be both displayed and manipulated. Hair changing rituals are particularly potent occasions for displaying and manipulating reputation because of the important symbolism of hair, particularly women's hair, in Tibetan contexts. The importance of women's hair as a symbol of a family's reputation has thus now been intensified for families who still hold the ritual, but greatly reduced for those who do not. These materials thus demonstrate the role of decisions made by individuals and families in the process of cultural alterations, as attitudes and priorities regarding progress, prosperity, and reputation collectively impact the maintenance and discontinuation of local traditions. Such decisions and decision-making processes deserve further study. Finally, this study

demonstrates how vernacular rituals provide rich ground for examining and understanding the losses and continuities brought about by rapid economic change on the Tibetan Plateau.

FIGURES

The photographs below were taken in August of 2009 in Mtha' ba Village by Blo bzang tshe ring. The clothing, decorations, and hairstyle depicted in the photos were worn by the young woman during her hair changing ritual.









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NON-ENGLISH TERMS

'Brug mo skyid འབྲུག་མོ་སྐྱིད།

A

A du 阿杜

A mchog ཨ་མཚོག

A mgon ཨ་མགོན།

B

Bkra shi lhun po བཀྱ་ཤི་ལུན་པོ།

Bkra shis bzang po བཀྱ་ཤིས་བཟང་པོ།

Bla brang ལྷ་བྲང་།

Blo bzang tshe ring ལྷོ་བཟང་ཚེ་རིང་།

Bsang chu བསང་ཆུ།, Xiahe 夏河

Bsang khog བསང་ཁོག

Bya khog བྱ་ཁོག

C

che ba ཚེ་བ།

Chu sngon ཆུ་སྒོན།

chung bo ཆུང་བོ།

D

Deng Xiaoping དེང་ཆུ་ཤིང་པིང་།

Dga ldan དག་ལ་ལྷན།

Dge lugs pa དགེ་ལུགས་པ།

Don 'grub sgrol ma དོན་འགྲུབ་སྒྲོལ་མ།

drang gi རྟང་གི།

F

Fujian 福建

G

Gannan 甘南, Kan lho ཀན་ལྷོ།

Gansu 甘肅, Kan su'u ཀན་སུ་ཁུ།

go dmar གོ་དམར།

gro ma གྲོ་མ།

Gtsos གཙུག་པོ།

H

hra gi རྩ་གི
Huanghe 黄河
Hui 回

J

jiunian yiwu jiaoyu 九年义务教育

K

Ka chu ཀ་ཚུ། Linxia 临夏
Kan lho ཀན་ལྷོ།, Gannan 甘南
Kan su'u ཀན་སུ་ལུ།, Gansu 甘肃
kha btags ཁ་བརྟག་སྐུ།
Khams ཁམས།
Khri ka ཁྲི་ཀ།
khyab pa ཁྱེད་པ།
khyim rgyud ཁྱིམ་རྒྱུད།
khyim tshang ཁྱིམ་ཚང།
Klu chu ལུ་ཚུ།
Ko tshe ལོ་ཚེ།
Kun dga' ལུང་དགའ།

L

Lha sa ལྷ་ས།, Lasa 拉萨
Li thang ལི་ཐང།
Lo sar ལོ་སར།

M

mar khu མར་ཁུ།
Mi nyag མི་ཉག།
ming མིང།
Mtha' ba མཐའ་བ།
Mtsho lho མཚོ་ལྷོ།
Mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྔོན།, Qinghai 青海
mu མུ།

N

Nyag rong ཉག་རོང།

P

phrug ཕུག།

Phug sde ཕུག་སྡེ།

Q

Qingdao 青 島

R

Rgan rgya རྒྱན་རྒྱ།

rgyas pa རྒྱལ་པ།

Rin chen rdo rje རིན་ཆེན་རྡོ་རྗེ།

RMB Renminbi 人 民 币

rtsam pa རུས་པ།

S

Sa mtsho skyid ས་མཚོ་སྐྱིད།

Se ra སེ་ར།

Shaanxi 陕 西

Shar lung ཤར་ལུང་།

skor bro སྐོར་བོ།

skra སྐྱ།

skra phab སྐྱ་ཕབ།

skra sla ma སྐྱ་སྐྱ་མ།

Sku 'bum སྐུ་འབུམ།, Ta'er 塔 尔

snyan grags སྐྱེན་གྲགས།

Stag rig སྐྱག་རིག།

T

Ta hui ai ni de 他 会 爱 你 的

Tshe dpal rdo rje ཚེ་དཔལ་རྡོ་རྗེ།

tsog pa ཙོག་པ།